

Onondaga County, New York

Early Childhood Alliance Brings Wide Range of Stakeholders on Board for Infants and Toddlers

OVERVIEW

A 2014 study conducted by the Onondaga County Citizen's League found that only half of the county's five-year-olds were kindergarten ready. In response, the Onondaga's Early Childhood Alliance (ECA) was created in 2015, and a partnership with the Syracuse-based Allyn Family Foundation was formed to build a coalition of local businesses, philanthropies, libraries, nonprofits, and other public sector partners dedicated to early childhood.

The ECA is working to create a stronger system of early childhood care and family support services that will help Onondaga's infants and toddlers thrive. In 2019, the early success and broad base of support for the ECA led to the doubling of the annual budget from \$1.5 million to \$3 million.

THE PURPOSE

The Early Childhood Alliance's (ECA) far-reaching agenda includes raising the quality of early care and education services (both center-based and home-based), promoting developmental screenings for infants and toddlers, increasing early childhood literacy rates, reducing unintended pregnancies, strengthening home visiting and parental support systems, and reducing health disparities for high-risk pregnant women and infants in Onondaga County.

One of the biggest challenges revealed in the Onondaga's Citizen's League study from 2013-2014 was that the community lacked a strategic, systemic approach to early childhood issues. The study found many helpful services operating in the area, but that a lack of coordination and collaborative goal-setting

limited the potential impact on young children and families.

The primary reason for formalizing the ECA was to bring together community leaders and build a cohesive system that aligned multiple community stakeholders. The ECA and its partners believed this initial groundwork would pave the path for increasing public investment in early childhood, especially for infants and toddlers.

"As a community, we weren't having a concerted dialogue going on as far as how to strengthen children and get better results for families. In our biggest school district, only 9 percent of children were reading at grade level, which was very alarming. So it didn't take a lot of convincing; everyone was in agreement that we needed to do better," said Laurie Black, Director of ECA Onondaga.

THE MODEL

Initially, the Early Childhood Alliance (ECA) began as a voluntary and informal entity. The group soon realized they needed a dedicated full-time director, so they hired Laurie Black to support the various committees that operate under the ECA's umbrella. These committees are comprised of stakeholders and community representatives who work on a single critical issue like pregnancy and parenting, unintended pregnancies, and early child care and early learning. The ECA also coordinates committees and work groups, including a Steering Committee, Data Committee, and Business Council.

"Cultivating the business community has been an important aspect of our work. We knew from the



beginning we wanted business voices at the table,” Black said. The current head of the ECA’s Business Council is the vice president of M&T Bank, and local leadership from the manufacturing association has been instrumental in connecting the dots between workforce issues and early childhood. The Business Committee has also helped engage local elected officials.

One of the campaigns supported by the Business Council from the beginning, Black said, is the “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” literacy campaign from Too Small to Fail (an initiative of the Clinton Foundation). The program helps to inform parents about simple strategies they can use to encourage development and build their child’s vocabulary from infancy. Onondaga’s approach uses a tote bag strategy, sponsored by the Business Council, to provide books and materials for families. The ECA’s home visiting partners disseminate the bags so that trusted messengers deliver the Talking is Teaching information to families with infants and toddlers.

“Our Talking is Teaching program evolved over the course of about a year,” Kara Williams from the Allyn Foundation noted. “We did some early testing and found that giving out books is important but not enough to get parents reading to their kids. When you add that extra layer of helping parents, coaching them on how and why to do it, that really hit home. Besides the Business Council and the home visiting services, we also engage the pediatricians and the libraries so we can communicate the message at a broader community level.”

WHY IT WORKS

“In a small community like ours where everyone knows each other, leadership buy-in becomes a magnifying effect. We’re finding that if a few business leaders become champions, the county executive becomes a champion, and then it’s easier for others to get on board, which, of course, leads to further investments,” said Kara Williams.

Black further describes, “When we go and meet policymakers with business leaders alongside us, we get a very different response about the need to support child care.” However, she added, “the Business Council wants results, so we have to maintain momentum and try to bridge their desire to see quick results with the reality that this is a long-term project. We do that by keeping them plugged in and using data that show results.”

The initial strategy employed by the ECA was to first develop and pilot a strategy using private funding, then work with policymakers to figure out a resource plan for moving forward. Kara Williams from the Allyn Foundation explained, “What private philanthropy is good at is taking risk and testing ideas. We don’t stick with that very long, but public dollars can’t take that kind of risk. Private funding does well at finding proven strategies, and then strategically you shift to public dollars down the road. The reason that works, the reason the public sector is willing to pick that up is because our process has credibility. We collect the data, we identify the gaps, then we research the strategies that are working elsewhere and would fit our community. Every step of the way all of the partners are part of the discussion. We always bring our partners with us.”

As a result of this strategy, in 2019, County Executive Ryan McMahon proposed to double the \$1.5 million budget for the ECA to increase support for Talking is Teaching, child care, Help Me Grow, and parent leadership initiatives. Securing additional public funding marks a new phase for the ECA’s efforts to build a better system for infants, toddlers, and families with young children.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The ECA’s committees are not afraid to take on long-standing, culturally embedded, and challenging issues by engaging with those tackling the issues on the ground. The group has identified key areas of focus, including support for pregnant and



parenting women, increasing child care access and quality, developing community-wide strategies for tackling comprehensive screening, parent education empowerment messages, and addressing high rates of unintended pregnancy.

For example, the Unintended Pregnancy Committee found that women who experience unintended pregnancies often feel very unsupported and isolated, so they engaged young women and healthcare providers to shape an agenda designed to change social norms surrounding contraceptives and reproductive information.

The committee supported a grassroots community campaign with a specially designed chatbot called LalyasGotYou.com, where young women could ask questions. The answers come in the form of an "older sister" named Lalya giving medically correct advice that draws from a large database of answers crafted by experts, parents, and medical providers. The committee also recruited "internet influencers" who are real young women working online as volunteers to help the campaign, as well as many local young women of color who continue to help design the content and style of the project.

Another strength of the ECA is recognizing the power of standing behind other organizations that might be better equipped to intervene. One of the ECA's committees, the Early Child Care and Early Learning Committee, worked with a national child care consultant to develop strategies that would advance the quality of child care in the Onondaga region. The challenge there is increasing worker pay as well as increasing the quality of the programs, Black noted. A pilot program will be introduced that will include five centers and ten family providers with the county funding 60 percent of the costs. The consultant also performed a 10-year rollout cost analysis for all centers and family providers as part of a long-term strategy for the ECA.

The ECA will not direct services itself but will instead rely on its partnership with Child Care Solutions, the local Child Care Resource & Referral Agency (CCR&R). "We usually try to identify a partner who could best implement services," Black explained. "In this case, given Child Care Solutions' expertise in supporting child care providers, they are going to be the best partner for quality improvement."



SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

**“Early Childhood and School Readiness: Creating a Community Where All Children Thrive by Five,”
Onondaga Citizen’s League, March 2014.**

<http://onondagacitizensleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/OCL-2013-final-copy-for-web.pdf>

The Allyn Family Foundation website.

<https://www.allynfoundation.org/>

Onondaga Early Childhood Alliance website.

<http://ecaonondaga.org/about-us>

Too Small to Fail website.

<http://toosmall.org/>

Layla chatbot

www.laylasgotyou.com.

“Transforming the Early Childhood Landscape in Onondaga County: A Vision for School Readiness in All Children,” Childcare Solutions New York.

<https://childcaresolutionscny.org/transforming-early-childhood-landscape-onondaga-county>.

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